

The University Working in the Community

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A NUTRITION AIDE works to help families in a community improve their level of nutrition.

A human relations specialist works with industrial managers in a community to help them learn effective ways of working with people.

A community development specialist assists community organizations to determine alternatives to provide for survival of the community.

An extension law enforcement specialist from the state university assists in training community policemen.

The legislature cuts the budget of the state university because the legislators can't see the university working in their districts.

Funds for support of the county university extension center are cut by the county court, because the people of the community can't see the university working in the community.

Talk to the general populace. They will tell you tales of "hippie" students at the state university, and "even professors that go barefoot." And, again, the trees have obscured the forest.

Why?

Is the university really lacking in what it is doing? Or is it there, working as it should be, and simply not telling anyone about it?

But how can this be? We encourage extension specialists to write columns, news stories, make radio tapes, do television shows. Surely we "tell 'em," as the saying goes. Why don't they listen?

I was searching for a county center one day, in a town of 1,500. I drove into town, stopped beside the courthouse where

a man was raising a flag, and asked him where the county extension center was. He told me he didn't know, but they could probably tell me in the ASC office close by. I asked the woman at the counter, who told me she didn't know, but she called another woman, who told me that it was on the other side of the square in the old bank building, and I couldn't miss it. On the other side of the square, I didn't see anything that looked remotely like an old bank building, so I stopped a man passing by, and asked him where the extension center was. He said he didn't know, but maybe another man passing by could tell me. That man directed me to a building right beside us, and sure enough, behind the farm organizations signs, and up the stairs, I found the extension center. Now, that is not all of the story. When I told my adventures to the farm management agent, he said, "Now, the funny part is . . . the first guy you asked, raising the flag . . . he's our janitor."

I was doing research in another community, and one of my interviewees asked if he could meet me somewhere for the interview. When I suggested the county extension center, he asked promptly, "Where's that?" He had run a grocery business in the community of 6,000 for about 10 years.

On another research project, I found the city editor of a large metropolitan newspaper surprised to learn that the university had an extension center in a downtown location, just a few blocks from the newspaper. He thought the only location in the county was out of the metropolitan area.

Again, why?

There are, of course, many complicated explanations involved with answering such a difficult question. Let us briefly examine four areas, assessing them in terms of how they might relate to the university working in the community, and how they might bear on the effectiveness of the work the university is able to do in the community.

These four topics will be headed respectively as: training of personnel; use of mass media; program planning; and systematic plans for reporting to the community.

Training Of Personnel

Almost all extension agents get training in communication, on the theory that each agent will do his own good job of publiciz-

ing his program, and communicating with his particular audience through the media available to him. But the idea of every agent a communicator is unrealistic. There are only certain agents that have the talent or interest to work well with mass media. The limited time available for training agents in communication, and the vast amount of competition for training from speciality fields, virtually guarantee that when everyone is trained across the board in communication, few get trained adequately.

Yet all agents are expected to make expert use of mass media in reaching the people of their community.

Use Of Mass Media

Extension receives a great deal of coverage in the weekly and daily newspapers. In fact, if you take a close look at the extension news printed in local newspapers, you will begin to realize how easy it must be to get the material printed. Many times, the editor will print anything that comes from the extension center, without even editing it. Or correcting it.

What is the best use of mass media? Research report after research report has added evidence that newspapers, magazines, radio, and television are of the greatest value in creating awareness and interest. Yet, column after column, radio tape after television program, agricultural specialists insist on giving the listening, viewing, and reading audience the whole subject matter load. Can we really use a shotgun approach to teaching by mass media? I suggest that the best use of mass media by the agent is to create awareness of an idea. From that base, he can help make the person ready for a more personal approach at a later time.

Program Planning

Purposeful program planning can contribute to communication within the community, if we plan with the community groups that will be the focus of our efforts.

If we can plug in the specific activities and the specific expertise that we can bring to the program, instead of talking in general terms about general teaching activities, it can help to do at least two things.

It can help to aid communication between us and the people

with whom we hope to work, and give them a better idea of how our educational program can fit into their lives; and it can help us to make a more realistic plan of work, use our time more efficiently, and make a more useful evaluation of our efforts.

A Systematic Plan For Communication

What are the alternatives to the present ways we have of "telling 'em"? One of the alternatives is to train, in depth, those people who show the most interest and talent in communicating with the people of the community. Another alternative might be to assign a regional specialist in communication who can, through contacts with media, and consultation with county staffs, tell sincerely and locally, the ways in which the university can help the community.

It seems only logical that some sort of a systematic plan should be developed to guide an area or a state in using all of the media, both mass and personal. Some sort of coordination is a must.

The adoption process—awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption—applies to an idea as well as a product for sale. The adoption process concept may have been around for some time, but it can still be useful in helping to visualize where we want to go, what we want to do, and what we can expect of the various tools available, as we help the people of the community to go through this process of accepting ideas about us.

A systematic plan for sincerely telling people about the university in the community can facilitate the educational process. Not to propagandize the university. But to create awareness among the people of the community of the university as a source of help; as a source of alternatives; not a university in some far-off corner of the state, but a university working within the community to provide alternatives for everyone in the community.